



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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Will You Take A Risk For Me?

Matthew 25:14-30, Mark 8: 34-38

Personally, I can't think of any business that is riskier than farming. First of all there is an element of danger to it. Farmers handle chemicals and machinery that have low tolerance for error. If you mess up with the anhydrous, or your clothes get caught in an auger of some other piece of machinery, you could lose a limb, a lung or even your life. And there is also the financial risk. Farmers take a huge risk every year when they put in their crops. They invest in land, machinery, seed, chemicals for the soil—not to mention fuel costs...all in the hope that there will be warm weather, sunshine, rain and wind...all in the right amount and at the right time. If a wind or hail or floods occur, a farmer can incur additional expense, especially if the damage necessitates re-seeding. And the farmers risk doesn't end there.. they also have to gauge when the right time has come to harvest their crops....harvest them too early and drying costs will take a chunk out of their profits, harvest them late and wind or weather could damage the crops and make them difficult to harvest. Not to mention the volatile nature of the grain markets... Many small fortunes have been lost by selling at the wrong time...especially in the futures market..

So why do farmers farm? Why do they engage in this risky business? I suspect there are a lot of reasons. For many farmers it has to do with tradition. It was what they were raised to do. Early on in their lives they were infused with a love of the land, and they rather like working out in nature, watching seeds sprout and grow into plants and eventually into produce. Then too, most farmers are entrepreneurs who like being in control of their own lives. They like making decisions, they like having the ability to decide what is growing to grow in which field. And I think some farmers like the idea of being partners with God, watching young things sprout and grow and produce the crop that will eventually feed the world. But one thing is for sure, whatever reason they give for being a farmer...that reason is more important to them than all the risk they subject themselves to. A farmer has faith that their calling, the reason they are a farmer is worth the risk, whatever effort, sacrifice and financial commitment they might be called upon to undertake. And if that ceases to be true they usually find something else to do.

Jesus tells us in our scripture today, that the same deal is true when it comes to discipleship. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." In other words, if you want to be a disciple, be a disciple. But it ain't necessarily going to be easy. Just like farming, it's going to take effort, its going to require sacrifice —maybe even financial sacrifice (that's what that bit about "denying yourself" is all about) and its going to take commitment. After all becoming a disciple is a life long process and just like any other relationship... if you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ then your relationship with Jesus will need some nurturing, some attention and from time to time it will challenge the dickens out of you. Being a disciple means that just like farmers... we are called to be partners with God as we invest ourselves in

nurturing young things....young faiths, new disciples so that they can grow and eventually go out to feed the souls of the world.

The Parable of the Talents centers on this business of taking on the challenges of discipleship. . It tells the story of a wealthy landowner who entrusts his worldly goods to his servants. Two of the servants recognize an opportunity when they see one and so out of love for their Master they develop and invest what had been entrusted to them and in so doing they increase its worth and end up enriching their lives. But then there is a third servant...a certain one-talent guy. He could have been just as blessed as the other two servants but he settled for much less. Now there are those who might defend his actions by saying that he was just playing it safe when he buried what he had been given...but I would contend that the risk he took in burying his talent was even greater than he might have incurred if he would have put it in this years stock market.

.Years ago, when I was in my last year of seminary, my mother died. Now that was hard enough, but matters were even more complicated by the fact that she lived in Shawano Wisconsin which is about 30 miles east of Green Bay and we were living in Montrose, which is near Effingham. The seminary I was attending was in Indianapolis which was a three hour drive away....and to complicate things further I had 3 kids to mother and 3 churches to pastor. Mom died the same semester that I was expected to write my X-815..my senior thesis ...which ranged nearly a hundred pages long...it had to incorporate all 94 hours of my post graduate work: church history, Theology and pastoral counseling as well as fully state our own beliefs. The paper had to be defended in front of several groups of students and the faculty of the seminary. Fortunately we had been forewarned of Mom's impending death so we were able to see her several weeks before she died, but that and the time I took off for her funeral meant I had lost several critical weeks out of the process. When I returned to seminary, my mind was numb, and writing that paper was the last thing I wanted to do. But I needed to get on with it... my kids need their mother home and I needed to finish seminary so Kevin could begin. I struggled to write the paper but I felt like I was burnt out...I just could not write one more scholarly paper. And so finally, I became inspired by the idea of writing the paper as a story... A story about a treasure box ...each item in the box representing a aspect of my theology and faith journey. It seemed like something I could do...something I really wanted to do...but it was so risky. If my paper got turned down it would mean another year at the seminary....another year of balancing three churches, three kids and the three hour drive back and forth to Indianapolis. So I went to my advisor and asked him what I should do and he told me this story:

He said, "Everyone has heard the tale of the talents. The master gave his three servants varying amounts of talents.. One guy got five, another two and another on. Well believe it or not there was a fourth servant named Joe who got three talents. Unfortunately this poor servant invested all three of his talents in chariot 18 spoke chariot wheels and that year they switched to twelve and so he lost everything. Well this poor Joe is summoned to come to the master just like the other three servants ...but he is ashamed and so he hides behind a curtain as he listens to the master doling out the favors to the two servants who's investments have

panned out. But then came the last one...the one who had buried his talent...and Joe was shocked to hear the Master say “ throw this worthless slave into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Wow! Joe figured he would be in real trouble now....he had done worse than the servant who had buried the talent he had lost it entirely.... Boy was he going to be in a world of hurting..he hadn't just failed to make profit, he had lost the original investment of three talents!

About that time, the Master spies the Joe hiding and trembling behind the curtain and he says “Joe get up here! I want to hear how you made out with the three talents I gave you.” So Joe came forward and fell on his knees wringing his hands and crying all the while he told his terrible tale of investments gone astray. And when he was finished he threw himself at the Masters feet begging for forgiveness.

But surprisingly, when he looked up, the Master was smiling and he said “Stand up Joe, let me take joy in the sight of you. Well done good and faithful servant, you were willing to take a risk for me!”

Well, following the advice my advisor gave me, I wrote that paper as a story, and it sailed through committees and faculty review and today it is located in the archives of the seminary library....all because I took a risk and stepped out in faith.

God did not call us to play it safe. The words of Jesus in this parable may sound harsh to us , but the man who played it safe but burying his talent actually was a “wicked servant” because he was also faithless and distrustful. He did not love the Master...he was afraid of the Master...and to make matters worse he was lazy and he placed his own comfort over the Masters mission. In many ways this servant was like a farm hand who hides the seed in a shed instead of planting it or a banker who puts your money in a drawer instead of investing it in a CD. This servant was not about to make the effort, the sacrifice and the commitment it takes..to bring a crop in for his Lord. So you see this servant was not only stupid in his investment strategies he was also a fraud. And he not only cheated his Master he also cheated himself because he missed out on the value a little effort ... a small amount of faith...might have added to his own life. As it was his life became a living hell. So you see, by playing it safe, he chose to die before he really lived.

In terms of the church and discipleship this parable teaches us that God expects us to use the gifts that we have been given... to take a risk just like the farmers do, to grow more disciples for Jesus Christ. You see the church is not just about us and our comfort and paying our bills. The Bible has a whole lot to say about that kind of behavior and I would not recommend pursuing that path.. Instead the Scripture urges, Jesus directly commands us... “to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and to follow him”.

Yes, being a church...being a disciple is a risky business, and no, we will never have all the answers we need to feel safe. But that's the way life is...if you want to grow ...if you want to change ..you have to step out in faith. Think about small children...they face the risk of falling down every time they stand up and attempt to walk,,,but they do it anyway, until eventually they get the muscle tone and the balance to achieve bi-pedal mobility. In the same way God intends for us to step out in faith ...even though there is a risk that we might fall down.. God wants us a church to stand up and step out...not because we have to...but because we can do

nothing else! God has invested the talent and means within this church to do his mission—to reach out into the world, to teach all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost... teaching them to observe all things that Jesus has commended usextending to the world and our community...especially the young people, the joy and the forgiveness and the healing that we ourselves have found in Jesus Christ.

Through this parable, God is speaking to each of us—challenging us to venture out, to live life in courageous faith, to invest our lives in Him and his business of making disciples for the transformation of the world. In this parable God is giving our church a formula for living life to the fullest—living for the glory of God.

I am told that there is an unusual portrait of Christ that hangs in a cathedral ...it shows a picture of bruised battered, crucified, which is not so unusual because I suspect that all cathedrals have about 50 such pictures. What made this picture so unusual was it's caption which read: "This I did for you what will you do for me"

That's a good question.... Are we willing to make the effort, the sacrifice and the commitment that is required to plant the seeds of faith, to nurture disciples and to send them forth to feed more souls ...are we willing to take a risk for Jesus?